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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND THE UN PEACEBUILDING

COMMISSION: MEETING OF AMB. TAHIR-KHELI AND A/SYG MCASKIE

REF: STATE 178055

11. (SBU) Summary. Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Women's Empowerment Shirin Tahir-Kheli called upon UN Assistant Secretary-General Carolyn McAskie, who heads the recently created Peacebuilding Support Office of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). McAskie commended the Secretary's outreach and support for the advancement of women

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worldwide, which Ambassador Tahir-Kheli described. McAskie emphasized her hope that the PBC would shine a spotlight on the role of women in post-conflict situations. While lamenting a lack of clarity about the PBC's mandate, McAskie said this new institution needed time to coalesce. She recommended Burundi as a post-conflict country where the Women's Empowerment office (S/WE) might add special value by focusing on education, violence against women and land property rights. McAskie acknowledged that the UN system itself had a long way to go to rectify gender imbalances within the UN system itself, particularly at managerial levels. End Summary.

12. (U) On January 24, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Women's Empowerment Dr. Shirin Tahir-Kheli called upon A/SYG Carolyn McAskie (Canadian) at UN headquarters. McAskie heads the new Peacebuilding Support Office, which serves as a secretariat to the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). She

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took a lively interest in information Ambassador Tahir-Kheli provided about Secretary Rice's working session with women Ministers and Heads of State on September 23 on the margins of the UN General Assembly (reftel). Ambassador Tahir-Kheli described the five cluster groups that S/WE had identified as areas for action, including: education; political participation; peace and security; culture and religion; and economic empowerment. She noted that each of these areas embraced subgroups dedicated to critical issues that required concrete followup on the ground.

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A FLEDGLING PBC SHOULD FOCUS ON SMALL COUNTRIES  
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13. (SBU) With high praise for the Secretary's initiative, McAskie described her own experience and interest in the advancement of women, particularly in post-conflict situations. (Bio Note: McAskie served most recently as the senior UN envoy to Burundi and head of the UN peacekeeping operation there. From 1994 to 2004, she was the UN's Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator.) McAskie recalled that the resolutions that established the PBC in December 2005 had placed special emphasis on the role of women in rebuilding countries torn by conflict. Unfortunately, the PBC had so far failed to meet its promise or to agree upon a clear concept of what it might actually do. In McAskie's view, this

fledgling institution needed sharper definition and time to coalesce. She reminded that the Security Council had a history established over more than 60 years, whereas the PBC had not yet completed its first year of operation. For a start, the Peacebuilding Support Office that she heads needed to help establish a work plan, she volunteered.

¶4. (SBU) In the meantime, McAskie commended the PBC's attention to the first two country cases of Burundi and Sierra Leone. Country specific meetings conducted last October and December had played a useful role in helping the two countries better define their own priorities, McAskie contended. Regarding other candidate countries for PBC consideration, she suggested that selection criteria were probably better left undefined and she noted the designated role of the Security Council in making such recommendations when a peacekeeping operation was on the ground. At the same time, she emphasized that a country must have emerged from conflict and passed into a stabilization period with an elected government in order to qualify for PBC attention. Such a modicum of stability was necessary to attract institutional donors, she said.

¶5. (SBU) In McAskie's personal opinion, the PBC needed to focus on smaller countries that are not objects of massive international attention, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, neglected countries that risked a relapse into strife owing to lack of support from the international community were more compelling candidates for PBC attention. Aid was important, McAskie said, noting that Burundi had only five significant donors.

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BURUNDI OFFERS OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
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¶6. (U) Speaking from her on-site experience, McAskie described the uphill obstacles that women in Burundi sought to overcome, starting with their forced exclusion from the  
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1999 Arusha Peace Process. While UNIFEM had helped insert language into the Arusha accords that set standards for the participation of women in Burundi's parliament, the quotas proved hard to enforce in practice. Assessing the needs of women in post-conflict countries was complicated, McAskie said, requiring analysis of legal, family and social structures. In Burundi, she had helped reform land rights and inheritance laws.

¶7. (SBU) Ambassador Tahir-Kheli asked McAskie's opinion about where the U.S. and other countries might most effectively add value to women's security in a post-conflict environment. McAskie did not hesitate to recommend a focus on Burundi, particularly in the key areas of women's education, violence against women, and property rights. Because the Government of Burundi was committed to addressing these issues and counted upon a Minister for Gender for Affairs, she predicted that U.S. empowerment initiatives could result in real progress. McAskie suggested that Tahir-Kheli consider a trip to Burundi, using Foreign Minister Antoinette Batumubwira as an entry point to introduce initiatives.

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GENDER EQUITY LAGS IN THE UN SYSTEM  
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¶8. (SBU) Finally, Tahir-Kheli pointed out the lamentable under-representation of women in the UN system. McAskie was candid in deploring the failure of former SYG Kofi Annan to improve this situation. While the UN hired a good percentage of women at junior job levels, McAskie admitted they were woefully short in managerial and top level positions - altogether under 15 percent. Out of a total of 67 SRSG's (Special Representatives of the Secretary-General), only one is a woman, she said.

¶9. (SBU) McAskie encouraged the U.S. to study recommendations of the UN Report on System-wide Coherence regarding gender mainstreaming. The proposed creation of an Under Secretary-General position to consolidate leadership on gender equality and women's empowerment was a core recommendation that Annan had hoped to act upon. However, time had run out on his tenure before Annan could take action, McAskie said.

¶10. (U) Ambassador Tahir-Kheli has cleared this cable.  
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